

A coin hunter literally digs his favorite pastime

By Roger Boye

When coin buff Samuel Johnson searches for buried treasure, he doesn't have to dive for sunken Spanish ships in the Caribbean.

Rather, he simply visits a school playground or churchyard near his home in downstate Sparta, crisscrossing the earth with a metal detector. For every hour he works, he figures he'll find an average of 14 coins.

"Sometimes I hit cold streaks and get discouraged," Johnson said of his fascinating pastime, "but when I least expect it, boom, there's something sweet."

Johnson has made many sweet finds in his 12 years as a "coin shooter," the nickname for hobbyists who hunt with metal detectors. He has bagged 89 gold or silver rings, hundreds of tokens and more than 28,600 coins, including nearly 3,600 silver specimens and 500 Indian-head cents.

Johnson calculates that he has spent at least 2,000 hours with a metal detector, a machine that costs from \$75 to \$600 or more depending on the model, accessories and condition. Detectors emit a buzz when their electromagnetic fields pass over metal objects buried at depths up to about 10 inches.

When his machine sounds off, Johnson cuts a small hole in the soil to retrieve the hoped-for treasure. Then he carefully replaces the plug of soil, leaving the ground undamaged.

Johnson also gets permission whenever searching for coins on private property, such as in the yards of old houses, one of his favorite targets.

Some hobby pros believe the odds are 1 in 500 of uncovering 10,000 coins using a metal detector. With the work involved, many searchers give up when they hit a dry spell.

But for Johnson, who is the vice president of the Illinois State Numismatic Association, the highs far outweigh the drudgery. He vividly recalls the discovery of an 1827 dime in the yard of a house more than a century old and four 1914-D cents, one of the rarest coins in the Lincoln penny series.

Perhaps his most memorable expedition was in the yard of a church in Sparta. He found more than 100 coins there, with 25 of them dated 1919, including a "fine condition" 1919-S quarter worth at least \$100.

"They must have had a huge celebration at that church in 1920 or 1921," he said. "People must have been dropping coins all over the place."

A footnote: Coins made with high percentages of copper often turn green or become corroded when buried. However, once the dirt is removed from an unearthed silver coin, "it looks as if you took it out of your pocket," Johnson added.